

# Lights and Shadows

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Volume 32 *Lights and Shadows* Volume 32

Article 15

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1988

## Room Without a View

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### Recommended Citation

Cromeans, L. M. (1988). Room Without a View. *Lights and Shadows*, 32 (1). Retrieved from <https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows/vol32/iss1/15>

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# Room Without A View

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Linda M. Cromeans

Second Place Short Story

Lauren sat in the kitchen of her grandmother's house, absently stirring the cooling bowl of French onion soup her aunt had insisted she try to eat. Aunt Ellen had assured her she would feel better if she ate something, but Lauren knew she wouldn't. Just the thought of lifting the spoon to her mouth and trying to swallow the greasy looking brown liquid made her want to vomit.

She kept thinking about the funeral, remembering her own shock and her brother's anguished sobs when they had first viewed the bloated, jaundiced body in the casket. They had stared at the dead man's puffy, yellow face, lined with a spider web network of ruptured blood vessels, and at the completely white, thinning hair.

"Oh God, no," Steve had cried, his voice strangled with sobs. "This isn't our daddy. It can't be him. I know it's not Daddy."

Lauren would never forget the stricken look on Steve's face, the pain mirrored in his eyes and in his voice. She had reached out her arms to hug him, but he had moved away from her, had cupped his hands over his face to hide his tears and muffle his sobs. Her heart had ached for him. She wanted to comfort him, to erase his grief, but she hadn't known how.

She had looked only once more at her dead father's face. Then she, too, had turned and walked away. She felt nothing. No sense of loss, no grief, no sorrow. Not even hate, and that had been strange, because Lauren had hated her father for

as long as she could remember.

Her mother had stood at the end of the casket, weeping quietly. Her tears had surprised Lauren, and she thought that someone must have said something to hurt her mother's feelings.

"Mother, what's wrong? Why are you crying? Has someone said something to upset you?" Lauren had asked, anger tinting her voice. And her mother's answer had caught Lauren completely off-guard.

"No, Lauren, no one said anything to upset me. It's just that I loved your father very much."

"How could you have, Mother? He never cared anything about us! How can you even think of crying for him after all he did to us?"

"Sis, don't talk like that. Please don't say bad things about Daddy—not now, okay? He couldn't help being the way he was."

"Bullshit!" Lauren hadn't meant to say that word, but she had been angry, and it had just popped out.

"Lauren! You had better remember where you are, young lady," Mother had warned. Angry red splotches had colored her mother's cheeks. Steve had flinched visibly, almost as if Lauren had dealt him a physical blow.

"Well, it is bullshit, Mother, and we all know it. Daddy was nothing but a drunk, and that's all he ever was. He could have stopped drinking. He just didn't want to, and I don't care that he's dead. So don't expect me to cry for him, because I'm not

*'Lauren would never forget the stricken look on Steve's face.'*



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(continued)**

***'...suddenly  
gasped and  
clutched his  
chest.'***

going to!" Lauren's voice had trembled with an anger fueled by nineteen years of hatred.

And she hadn't cried. Not during the memorial service at the funeral home and not during the graveside service at the cemetery. Tears had welled into Lauren's eyes only when her grandmother had leaned down to kiss her dead son's forehead before the undertakers closed the casket, but Lauren had blinked them back furiously, determined not to shed any tears.

She had sat stiff and unyielding in the funeral home chapel, remembering how very little she and Steve had heard from their father in the ten years since her parents divorced. He had called a few times, had written occasionally, had even sent a couple of dollars on their birthdays and at Christmas, but that had stopped long ago. Lauren hadn't cared. She really hadn't wanted to hear from him, or to see him ever again. She hadn't even wanted to come to his funeral.

"Well, thank God, it's over now," Lauren mumbled to herself.

The French onion soup had turned into a thick, gelatinous mass. Lauren took the bowl to the sink, raked its contents into the drain, and ran a fast stream of water to push it through. She hoped it wouldn't clog the pipes.

From the living room came the sounds of muted voices. People she didn't know—Mama Clary's friends and neighbors mostly—had been coming by to bring food and offer their sympathies ever

since they had gotten home from the cemetery. Lauren knew she should be in there with the rest of the family, but she didn't want to hear any more empty comments about how nice the service was, how lovely the flowers were, or how peaceful Clayton looked in death. She had escaped to the kitchen to get away from the people and to be alone with her thoughts. After what seemed an interminably long time, the guests had all finally departed, leaving Steve, Lauren, and their mother alone with Mama Clary.

They fixed sandwiches and talked small talk. Mama Clary hadn't seen them in five years and she wanted to catch up on all that had happened in their lives. But the talk had inevitably turned to Clayton's death.

He had been sitting in the living room watching television, had suddenly gasped and clutched his chest. Mama Clary had called an ambulance, but he had died before it arrived. An autopsy showed that a blood clot, a coronary thrombosis, had broken loose and had traveled to his heart. The doctor had told Mama Clary it was a fairly common occurrence in alcoholics.

"But Clayton had quit drinking about six months ago, and he was doing so good. Why, he talked about you children all the time, and showed your pictures to everybody. Of course, they was just old pictures, but he didn't care. He loved you and was so proud of you both."

Lauren stood up and began clearing the table. Steve listened intently as his grandmother talked on about their daddy's life,



but Lauren didn't want to listen, had already heard more than enough about him.

"All of his things are back there in his room. I want you children to take whatever you want, because your daddy would want you to have them," Mama Clary said.

"Oh no, Mama Clary. We wouldn't think of taking his things," Lauren said, whirling around to face her grandmother. "You should keep them."

"No, I want you to have them," Mama Clary insisted, as she got up from the table. "Now you two just go on back to your daddy's room while we put away the rest of this food."

Lauren looked at Steve. He seemed to be waiting for her to make the first move, but Lauren didn't want to go into her father's room. And she definitely didn't want to go through his things. Not now, not tomorrow, not ever. What she wanted most was to get away, to divorce herself from the entire scene.

"I . . . I need some fresh air," Lauren stammered, and bolted for the back door.

Outside on the patio, Lauren dropped into an old wooden swing and began to sway back and forth. A light breeze caught her long hair, floating it across her face. As she reached up to whip the errant strands behind her ears, anger, frustration, and bitterness flooded over her. Hot, salty tears stung her eyes, and she rubbed at them furiously with tightly clenched fists. Enough was enough. She had come to her father's funeral even though she hadn't wanted to, but she'd be damned if she was

going to sort through his things and pick out keepsakes to serve as constant reminders of him. She remembered far too much as it was.

He had come home drunk almost every night. Sometimes he would go to bed or fall on the couch and pass out, but more often, he would stagger through the house, knocking over furniture, yelling obscenities, hitting anyone or anything that cross his path. Like their old cat, Prissy, who hadn't gotten out of the way fast enough one night. Daddy had stomped Prissy's head, breaking her jaw and mangling her tongue so badly that she had to be put out of her misery a few days later by their next door neighbor, Frank Mason.

Weeks after the incident, Daddy had brought home a small, yellow bundle of fur he said he'd found on the side of the road. And the new cat, Tom-Tom, had lived a long and happy life by disappearing every time he heard Daddy's voice. But Lauren never allowed herself to become too attached to Tom-Tom. The sight of Daddy's heavy workboot smashing down on poor Prissy's head had left too great an imprint on her mind.

She, Steve and Mother had collected their share of bruises, too. One summer day when she was nine, Daddy had come home in a particularly mean mood, and when he saw that she hadn't gotten the kitchen cleaned up yet, he had yanked off his belt and had tried to whip her. When she wiggled and squirmed too much for him to make his blows count, he had picked her up as if she were a sack of

*'...he would stagger...yelling obscenities, hitting anyone or anything.'*



***Room Without  
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(continued)***

cement, and had carried her out to the apple tree in the back yard. He had jammed her foot between two forked branches, hanging her upside down in the tree, and had beaten her until he grew tired and her throat was raw from screaming.

He had walked away, leaving her hanging there, her ankle scraped and swelling, her body crisscrossed with angry, red welts beaded with blood. She didn't remember how long she hung there before Mr. Mason found her and carried her to his house where his wife had washed away the blood and some of the pain with warm salt water.

But she did remember how angry Mr. Mason had been, how he had bellowed at his wife that it was a damned shame for kids to have to live in such a mess, and that he ought to call the sheriff to come get the drunk sonofabitch. But Mrs. Mason had reminded her husband that what he ought to do was mind his own business.

"You don't know what a drunk might do, Frank Mason, so you just shut your mouth and keep your nose out of it."

Things had grown steadily worse from then on. Daddy had started drinking more and getting meaner. Then he had started seeing things that weren't there. He would wrestle with phantoms, scream about giant bugs crawling on him, and cry about killing little children with bombs during the war. And he had started sleeping with a long bladed knife—the bayonet he had brought home from Korea—under his pillow.

An oblong, rectangle of light shot across the lawn in front of Lauren, causing her to jump. She looked toward the house and saw her mother framed in the kitchen window, the light above the sink turning the gray in her hair to silver. Lauren thought about all the times she had seen her mother punched, slapped, and beaten by her father before Mother had finally realized she had no choice but to leave him.

Mother had come home from work early one day and had packed a suitcase for her and Steve. She told them she was taking them to stay with their Uncle James and Aunt Stella for a few days. They had gotten there before dark, had eaten supper, and the grown-ups had gone out on the porch to talk while she and Steve watched television in the small living room.

From her position on the couch, Lauren had heard her mother telling her aunt and uncle about the problems at home.

"He sleeps with a bayonet under his pillow, and I'm scared he might end up killing all of us some night when he's in one of his rages."

Uncle James and Aunt Stella had agreed, saying that she should have left him long ago, back when he first started drinking, but Mother had told them that she had just kept hoping he would quit.

"And I believed the children needed him. I didn't want to hurt them by taking them away from him, but they're being hurt even more by my staying. I just can't stand any more of this."

Lauren had known her mother was



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(continued)

crying, and she had wanted to go to her, to comfort her, to tell her not to cry because it was okay with them if she left Daddy; but she had stayed on the couch, listening to the front-porch talk until she had drifted off to sleep. Mother had already gone when she awakened the next morning.

The following weekend, Lauren's mother had come back to get them. In a solemn voice, she had told them that she was divorcing Daddy, and that it meant he wouldn't be living with them any more. Steve had started crying like the seven-year-old baby he was, but Lauren hadn't cried even then. She had actually been happy, had felt only relief that Daddy was finally out of their lives.

Steve dropped into the swing beside Lauren, startling her. She hadn't heard him coming. She had been lost in memories of the past.

"Come on, Sis, let's go back inside and get this over with," Steve said.

Lauren looked at Steve for a long moment. Then she nodded her head, stood up, and followed him wordlessly back into the house and down the hall to their father's room.

The room was small and sparsely furnished. A bed, a dresser, a bedside table, and one straight-backed chair were the only pieces of furniture the room contained. Except for a lamp, which stood on the bedside table, and a single bottle of Old Spice after shave lotion, every surface was bare. There weren't even any pictures hanging on the light blue walls. And there were no windows.

The austerity of the room depressed her. It was almost as if no one had ever lived there.

"A motel room," Lauren thought. "It looks exactly like a motel room, except there's no Gideon's Bible laying on the bedside table."

Steve moved across the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. He sat hunched forward, his knees resting on his elbows, his eyes focused on the floor. Neither of them spoke.

Lauren rubbed her arms with her hands. She felt chilled even though the temperature of the room was comfortable.

"Might as well get this over with," she said, and moved to open the closet door. Then she stepped back and stared at the contents. Three shirts and two pairs of pants hung neatly from a metal rod. One of the shirts was a faded yellow and black plaid that Lauren recognized. She and Steve had gotten the shirt for their dad on Father's Day, but, good God, that had been before Mom and Dad divorced. At least twelve years ago.

Lauren took the shirt from the closet and looked at it closely. The collar was so badly frayed that the stays were coming through in places. It couldn't possibly be the same shirt, but it was. He had kept it all these years, even after it had grown threadbare.

She pushed the closet shut and turned her attention to the dresser. The first drawer contained underwear and socks. The second and third drawers were empty. The bottom drawer held a few paperback



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books, several boxes of matches, a plastic covered pack of loose-leaf notebook paper, and a yellow cigar box with Roi-Tan stamped in raised letters across the top.

Lauren sat down cross-legged on the floor and opened the cigar box. Steve slid to the floor beside her. They looked at each other for a few seconds, then Lauren turned the box over and dumped its contents onto the floor between them.

A gold metal object rolled a short distance across the floor and fell. It was a wedding ring. Lauren picked it up and saw the initials N.C.M. engraved inside. Except for the size and the initials, it was identical to the one her mother used to wear. She passed the ring to Steve, thinking he might want to keep it, but he merely glanced at it, and then dropped it back into the cigar box.

Lauren turned a small pile of papers right side up. She found an envelope containing her dad's Honorable Military Discharge, and handed that to Steve. He looked at it briefly, then folded it, and tucked it into his shirt pocket. Lauren wondered why Steve wanted to keep it, but she didn't ask.

The envelope also held several photographs. Snapshots mostly, and School Days pictures of her and Steve, none of them recent. The corners were cracked and curled from age and frequent handling.

"Look, Sis, he kept the letters we sent him." Steve held a small bundle of letters tied loosely together with a blue ribbon. It was a pitifully thin stack. Steve thumbed

through them.

"Seven, Lauren. We wrote him seven letters in ten years, and it looks like he read them over and over." Tears ran down Steve's face and ragged sobs tore from his throat. He stood and began pacing frantically.

"Do you realize he didn't have anything, Lauren? All of us had each other, but he ended up with nothing. Not even a window so he could look out of this rat hole of a room!" Steve turned suddenly and slammed his fist into the wall. Lauren had never seen him so angry. She didn't move. Was almost afraid to breathe.

"Seven letters, Sis. He was our daddy and we wrote him seven damned letters in ten years. Boy, we really knocked ourselves out, didn't we?"

Steve's shoulders slumped as his anger drained away. He moved slowly to the door, reached for the knob, and with his back turned to her said, "You know, Lauren, I don't think I even told Daddy that I loved him." He closed the door softly behind him.

For long minutes after Steve left the room, Lauren sat staring at the letters and pictures scattered over the floor. Finally, with a loud sigh, she began to pick them up. As she gathered up the photographs, Lauren noticed one she had never seen before. It was a picture of her mom and dad sitting in a cheek-to-cheek pose. Daddy was wearing his military uniform, and Mom had a flower in her hair. They were smiling into the camera, their faces radiant with happiness. Two young people

*'Seven letters,  
Sis...seven  
damned letters...'*

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***Room Without  
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(continued)***

obviously very much in love, Lauren thought. It seemed strange somehow to think of them that way.

She started to put the picture back into the box, then changed her mind. It was the only thing she had found in this bleak, empty room that hinted of any happiness, and she realized suddenly that she wanted to keep the picture.

Lauren finished stacking the letters, retied the blue ribbon that had bound them together, placed them back in the cigar box, and closed the lid. Then she reached down and picked up the picture that lay beside her on the floor. The two young faces smiled at her from the photograph. Lauren smiled back.

And as she did, she began to cry.□